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We Make A Desert And Call It Reconciliation

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The Romans make a desert and call it peace, said Tacitus, speaking for peoples who suffered his empire's impositions or invasions. Something similar has happened metaphorically in indigenous-white dialogue in Australia.

In June 2001 the lurid accusations and name-calling among several Aboriginal leaders male and female put an end to national indigenous policy and political discussion. Media and political classes would listen to nothing but violence and social squalor on one hand, and offer only blame and moral exhortation on the other. Indigenous peoples were as neatly labelled and dismissed at home as Islamic extremists abroad. They had nothing to do with good people like us!

The national government has decided who may discuss what in indigenous policy, and in what terms, and proclaimed indigenous policy solved, e.g., in the prime ministerial interview with George Megalogenis in *The Australian*, 6-5-2002. What remains, we are told, is the material need, dysfunction, violence in many indigenous communities.

Now white people – especially politicians, editorial writers, columnists – do the talking, and Aborigines are only allowed a look-in if they seem to toe the new white line. Cape York's Noel Pearson has bits of his thinking picked up and requoted, often out of context, when he criticises the Left, welfare, and his own people, but without reference to his larger self-determination vision. In late 2004 he persuaded other indigenous leaders similarly to make the best of the Howard years so that some benefits could flow to often devastated communities.

In 2004 the national government abolished the national indigenous representative structure, ATSIC, because its ideas and statements did not please Howard. Nor did the fact that indigenous peoples had quasi-political recognition thereby. In order to have indigenous faces for photo opportunities his minister then appointed an advisory group of individually worthy indigenous persons with whom to discuss how 'to secure marked improvements for Indigenous people, especially in the key areas of health, education, housing and employment with a focus on the immediate priorities of early childhood intervention, safer communities and reducing dependency on passive welfare', see Vanstone statement, 6-11-04.

All the hard work in indigenous policy remains to be done, whatever the Howard government thinks. Much of it consists of talk. The national government and state government have no real idea what to do, and it is hardly surprising that they would

rather ‘act’ than talk. Build an ablution block, unquestionably useful, to boast in your newsletter, rather than find out what is wrong on a larger scale. Don’t let the Aborigines hear you talking, and don’t let them talk. Just to make sure something results, let’s send top ministers and officials to small remote communities below the political radar in the hope they can find something, anything, helpful to do, to work. (At least this an implicit admission that the white man’s policies have failed, a small positive step.)

It is not possible simply to dismiss all but flushing toilets and health clinic statistics as empty symbolism. (Few governments in Australian history have been in love with symbols of, to many of us, a bygone age to the degree of the Howard government, but never mind.) Australia’s Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders comprise many cultural and political autonomies, even when they are not formed in political entities visible to, or recognised by, Canberra or other governments. Their shared disadvantage, historical dispossession, sense of discrimination, and socio-political and culture agendas are forming into a larger indigenous proto-‘nation’, especially where they mingle in large cities or towns despite varied original languages and locales. These autonomies, both old and new, are self-conscious communities with definable and moderate but strong political currents which will not be denied by white leaders who don’t hear or don’t listen.

The supposed opposition of rights and responsibilities is a red herring. The rights era grew out of Auschwitz, and the right not to be tortured, starved, frozen, or killed by deliberate human agency. It is a minimum recognition of human dignity, and in no way reducible to Australian party claptrap about rights as if these were a ‘right’ to borrow dad’s car in return for sonny’s responsibility mowing the lawn.

Rights and recognition, reconciliation or accommodation, hard truths and contrasting views of history all must be discussed. Words, words, words – sometimes loud, sometimes angry. The government’s reduction of social, cultural, and political debate to advertising-style one liners and *bons mots* may win votes among the uninformed but solves no problems. If governments want to keep Aborigines around to use as scapegoat for Victorian morality sermons about deserving and undeserving poor, that’s fine. But Australia needs national policy before the divide between black and white widens to greater violence. Black eyes on spouses today may become... burning buildings with police inside, tomorrow.

Now *The Australian*’s senior political editor Paul Kelly comments that one must assume ‘that Howard, as a realist, knows that these issues aren’t settled’ (11/12-12-04). Megalogenis now says that ‘on reconciliation Howard seems to equate leadership with waiting for his opponents to give up... The worry is that he, like most white Australians, still can’t grasp the idea that we should treat black Australia as an equal as a first step to improving the national dialogue’ (*The Australian*, 24/26-12-04). He then suggests – facetiously? – that Howard go and listen to indigenous people at every level.
